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ABSTRACT

Asserting that today's students are no less literate than were students of the past, this paper deplores the "manufactured" literacy crisis and the resultant rush to competency testing. The paper stresses that the current crisis is less one of literacy than a crisis about who is going to control what is taught and which students get into, and are permitted to stay in, college composition classes. In fact, the real issue is whether college education is to be kept for the privileged, the underprivileged shut out due to poor showings on competency tests that measure only the most superficial aspects of language use. Teachers ought to be educating people for living, and they ought to be teaching writing as a highly individual and personal act that must be responded to in human and individual ways. Teachers know more about what good writing is than do state legislatures or testmakers, and they need to maintain control of what is taught to students. (GW)

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The Manufactured Crisis

Elisabeth McPherson

I should start my part of this discussion with a disclaimer--about the title of the session--I don't believe there is such a thing as "standard English," although there may be lot of varying standards, and I don't believe there is a "literacy crisis," although there is certainly a lot of hullabaloo. I do believe there will be composition teachers in the next century, unless somebody thinks of a better way to let the computers take over, but I'm a little worried about what the teachers will teach, and who they'll teach it to.

Manufacturing a crisis makes good newspaper copy. In a country that thinks everything can be measured and reduced to a set of figures, it's easy enough to pick up some statistics and go on from there. If the SAT scores have gone down a bit -- and they undoubtedly have, --it's simpler to go in for some hand-wringing about the deplorable state of education than it is to ask who took those tests and what they actually measured. If the National Assessment reports that seventeen-year-olds are writing a little less well, it's more comfortable to assume that more drill -- and more drudgery -- will improve the situation than to ask the relevant question -- what does writing well mean? Actually, it wasn't the spelling and the punctuation that got worse -- it was the ideas and the communication. And if employers are complaining that graduates can't spell, and can't punctuate, and can't write a clear sentence, it's really not a crisis -- they've been making that same moan ever since I can remember, and they'll probably keep right on making it.

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As I understand "crisis" -- and one dictionary seems to reinforce my belief -- it's a decisive turning point, a moment of danger which, once it's past, determines whether things will get much better or much worse. I don't believe we're living at such a danger point, as far as national literacy is concerned. According to figures -- more statistics-- from DATABANK, in 1900 11% of Americans were illiterate; only one % is illiterate now. Of course I'm not sure what definition of literacy they were using in 1900, but then I'm not sure what definition of literacy the crisis-creators are using in 1970 either.

The same dictionary also offers a literary definition of crisis: in literature a crisis is the point at which hostile forces confront each other. That definition may fit the present situation a bit better; a good many of the forces involved in the controversy over reading and writing are clearly hostile. Voters are hostile enough that it's almost impossible to pass a school levy: my figures may be somewhat inaccurate, but I've been told that quite recently in Kansas City an educational bond issue was defeated by 4 to 1. That's more that hostility -- it's downright enmity. And a natural reaction, I suppose: if you think people are not doing their job well, it's only logical to give them less money to do it better.

Legislators are hostile -- and they're not only holding tightly onto the money for all education, including colleges, they're passing laws to control how many hours college teachers will teach, and who can graduate from high school, under what conditions. State legislatures, and not the teachers who know the students, are becoming the judges of who can write well enough to deserve a diploma. The rush to competency testing -- and it is a rush -- more than half the states in the country have either passed such laws or have bills under consideration -- is one of the most frightening results of this manufactured crisis. I find competency tests frightening both because they

are one more move toward the mechanization -- the dehumanization - of education but also because, in English at least, the tests can measure only the most mechanical and the least important parts of how people use their language. I heard it proposed at this conference a day or so ago that English teachers must be involved in making the tests. The reasoning was that since the tests are a political fact, the participation of English teachers might make the tests a little less bad. I can understand that reasoning, but I can't agree with it. There's no way that objective questions on a standardized test, graded and reported by machine, can make a fair judgment about how well a student can write, and all the humane impulses and genuine good will that English teachers may bring in their attempts to influence the questions will not alter that truth. Even if we insist, as many people are doing, that to test writing we need a writing sample, the situation doesn't get much better. I'd hate to have unalterable decisions made about my competence, about my future -- in effect, about me -- on the basis of what I produced in 40 minutes on a topic somebody else had chosen. That's just one more way of making writing a mechanical act -- words that are ground out in response to an artificial situation -- instead of what writing should be -- an act of communication in which somebody who has something to say says it because it needs saying.

Maybe we have reached a crisis, but it's less a crisis of literacy than a crisis of control. Somebody is going to determine what is important in composition teaching, and who makes that decision may influence what we're teaching in the third century. If we think communication is more important than commas, we'd better be sure we don't turn that decision over to legislators who've forgotten what a restrictive clause is, but they're pretty sure there's a rule about it, they're pretty sure that if everybody memorized the rule,

then writing would get better. A lot of what's going on, of course, is done not through ill-will, but through ignorance: an honest misunderstanding of what's being measured, and what the measurements mean. There's always the story of the legislator who was horrified because half the students in that state scored below the 50th percentile on some test or other -- he thought that if the schools were really doing their job, everybody would be above average, at least. I'd like to see composition classes produce students who were scornful of that kind of muddy thinking, no matter what percentile score they get on those so-called "writing tests."

Who decides what writing teaching ought to be is perhaps one part of the crisis -- although I hope it isn't -- but I think there's something even more serious involved. We may be approaching a crisis over who gets into our composition classes, or who stays in once they get there. Most of the weeping and wailing is concerned with the superficialities of language -- the use of so-called standard English. That's what most of the judgments are based on -- and it's the speakers of other dialects who are likely to get the low scores and find the doors shut in their faces. I can remember back to the days when the English composition department was supposed to be axeman for the college -- and here I'm using axeman deliberately -- I'm not about to say axeman or axewoman in this connection, although the female instructors, when there were any, were quite as guilty as anyone else of following the dictate that a quarter of the students should fail, and having failed English, be put on probation in the rest of the college. We're headed again in that deplorable direction, I'm afraid, and the achievement tests, and the competency tests and even the placement tests -- are pushing us closer and closer to it. What I'm talking about may be primarily a problem for community colleges -- it's certainly more intensified in urban two-year schools -- but I'd guess that any college

considering tighter admissions standards has a variation of that problem. Community colleges still have an open door, and most of them, I think, will continue to say they have, but it's an old cliche that the open door can become a revolving door, depending on what we do to our students after they get there, depending on the kind of judgments that we, or the computers, make about their language habits.

I think that's the real crisis we're facing: whether we're going to keep college education for the haves and shut the havenots out again -- whether schools and college will serve to secure the safety of those who are already fairly safe or whether we'll keep the promise I think we've been making -- that education is for everybody.

I'd like education to be for everybody -- but I'd like not to see it mass produced. We ought to be educating people for living, and for the betterment of society -- to use a high-falutin phrase for which I can't at the moment, think of a sensible substitute. Instead, so-called accountability and so-called standards are forcing us more and more toward a kind of deadly conformity. If the measure of our success, and the measure of our students' abilities, is the score or the percentile rank on a test, then it seems obvious that we'll be more successful, and our students will perform better even if they don't do any better, when we can bring the scores up. And the way to bring the scores up is to emphasize what the test thinks is important -- to teach to the test, and to make sure that what students learn is test taking, not writing.

Some of the administrators I know are talking about "the delivery of educational products." I asked in a meeting the other day how you delivered an educational product -- it turned out that they meant how many students you teach. Sometimes it gets even worse -- students are not just products, they're outputs. But I can't teach products and outputs -- I can only teach people.

Ernest House put it rather well when he said that in the kind of accountability some parts of the public seem to be demanding

> . . . educational services are perceived as products to be mass produced. This production-line model calls for elaborate prespecification and quality control. Emphasis is placed on that which is replicable, easily quantifiable [like those superficialities the tests can measure], readily discernible and unambiguous. Education becomes engineering and finally industrial production. Evaluation becomes greatly simplified; one need only compare the prespecification to the final product. . . .

But language and reading and writing are not that simple -- they can't be prespecified. Language is part of our humanity, of ourselves. And writing is -- should be -- a highly individual and personal act. A zerox machine can duplicate -- people can create, and should. If the purpose of writing is to communicate, rather than to offer the writer up for criticism and correction, then it must be responded to in human and individual ways.

There's a lot to be taught in composition classes, to students from all kinds of backgrounds, speaking all kinds of dialects, but we have to insist on making our own decisions about what needs to be emphasized when. We need to help students write effectively, not elegantly, and we need to encourage their own judgment of what will <u>be</u> effective. We need to help them understand emotional reactions to language and the cultural influence that language exerts on all of us. (One way of doing that might be to ask them how they feel about being "outputs" -- or how they react to the notion that all students and teachers are <u>he</u>, never <u>she</u>). We need to help them ask questions, not just repeat answers. We need to convince them that good writing is more than "correctness" -- a good deal more. And above all, we need to give them the confidence and the sense of worth without which nobody can write anything that's worth reading.

I don't think there's a literacy crisis -- my students are no less literate than they were twenty years ago -- but I do think there are strong signs of a crisis in control -- and even though composition teachers have made a lot of mistakes, and done a lot of things wrong, I think we know more about what good writing is, and maybe more about how to teach it, than the state legislature or the testmakers. I'd like to see us keep the control.

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